

My Friend Shane

# From One Native Life by Richard Wagman

THERE'S A ROMANCE to the feel of cold floorboards under bare feet, just as there's a romance to the snap, crackle and flame of the morning fire in the wood stove. The first tendrils of warmth poking outwards are a heartening to a new day.

In winter the morning chill is sharp in the cabin, and making the fire has come to be special for me. I watch the flames lick their way upwards, sip at my coffee and marvel at how life sometimes becomes art. It's a Rockwell painting. The civified man sits before a crackling fire, cradling a mug of coffee with the hint of a smile at the edges of his mouth. Behind him, the sun casts a slice of orange across the top of the mountain. Rustic. Charming. Perfect.

It all reminds me of a friend I had when I was twelve. His name was Shane Rivers. He was older than me, with bulging blue eyes and big ears, a sort of pre-Muppets Fozzie Bear. But he was funny, and he seemed to know a lot more about the world than I did. He and his family were poor folk.

We lived in Mildmay, Ontario, by then, an area of farms handed down through generations, established,

progressive, predictable. The kids I went to school with seemed to lack for nothing. Shane and his folks were renters just like we were. My adopted father was a policeman, though, while Shane's dad had to labour for a living. Unless you were a farmhand, there wasn't much work around there. Shane showed up at school sometimes without a lunch, and he wore the same clothes for days. He got ignored by kids because he was different and odd and poor. But I liked him, and we became friends. We took turns staying overnight at each other's homes, and I still recall the looks of horror on the faces of our schoolmates when I left the bus with him.

You could tell that things were hard for the Rivers family. Even as a kid I could see that. The cupboards were mostly bare, like the fridge was, and there were curls and tears in the faded linoleum. There wasn't much furniture, and there was no TV. The house was dilapidated and cold and damp. There were none of the shiny things I'd come to take for granted.

But Shane's family gathered around their wood stove for meals, suppers of cabbage soup with dumplings, Wonder Bread and margarine, and the talk they shared was different from the talk around our family table. Mr. and Mrs. Rivers took the time to ask each of their five kids about their day. They asked more questions about what they heard, and the meal passed with everyone being listened to and looked at—even me.

Later, the kids did homework around that fire. Mr.

Rivers made a game of sneaking in on tiptoe to add a clump of birch to the blaze while his kids worked. We made hot chocolate in a pot on top of the wood stove. In the morning, when the cold floorboards on my feet woke me up quickly, they gathered around the fire again for porridge. Everyone was sent off to school with hugs and good wishes, even if the lunch sack was small or missing.

I'd look back at that worn old house from the end of the driveway and think it was the warmest place I'd ever been. I felt welcomed there, as if my presence really mattered, as though I was family and had stories that needed hearing. The Rivers family had that fire, and it burned strongly with birch and pine and love.

We take so much for granted when we live a privileged life. We expect good things and good fortune as though they were a right. Even so, there's always something to complain about.

I've been on Indian reserves where you have to chop a hole in the ice for the day's drinking water. I've been to others where one wood stove heats a small frame house where twelve people live. In the cities, I've seen single rooms bare of everything but a cot and a hot plate. I've seen people living in basement rooms with no windows, mould creeping its way down the damp walls. I've seen poor folk of all ilk living lives far removed from anything I would call comfortable.

Shane Rivers and his family taught me that some things are more important than discomfort. I'd have given anything as a kid for half the heart that was shared around their fire. I'd have given anything to be heard, seen and validated every day of my life. Maybe an empty belly can be eased some if you're loved enough. I don't know. I never had to go to bed hungry.

But these days when I light that morning fire I remember Shane Rivers. I recall warmth that chased the damp and chill and brought everything into sharper relief—just like in a Rockwell painting.